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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 004991

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: JORDAN PREPARES FOR INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
"TRUE ISLAM"

REF: AMMAN 01785

Classified By: CDA David Hale for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Jordan will host an international conference from July 4-6 to promote the Amman Message of moderate Islam. Tentatively entitled "True Islam and its Role in Contemporary Society," the organizing foundation has issued invitations to Muslim scholars, government officials, and religious figures from various branches of Islam. To date approximately 150 invitees have accepted, including members of the Iraqi Sunni community; Ayatollah Sistani and other Iraqi Shia leaders have been invited, but have so far not responded. Organizers say the purpose of the conference is to show a united Islamic stance - including between Sunni and Shia - against terrorism and in favor of tolerance, while also endorsing principles aimed at stemming the proliferation of fatwas by Muslim extremists. King Abdullah is hopeful this event could help undermine religious pretexts for sectarian violence in Iraq, but does not want publicity for this effort until he is confident that agreement of key Iraqi Shia and Sunni clerics is in hand. End Summary.

CONFERENCE PREPARATIONS ON TRACK

2. (C) Following a preparatory meeting of Islamic clerics in Amman on February 23, Jordan's Al Al Bayt Foundation is gearing up to host an international conference of Muslim scholars, government officials (in their private capacity) and religious figures from July 4-6, under King Abdullah's patronage. The aim is to endorse the principles of the Amman Message, which proclaims that the "true nature" of Islam is one of moderation and tolerance (reftel). Acting PolCouns met with the lead conference organizers at Al Al Bayt -- Farouq al-Jarrah (Executive Director) and Ibrahim Shaboukh -- on June 21 to discuss ongoing preparations. They reported that they earlier issued approximately 200 invitations to Muslim religious notables from "all eight major Islamic schools of thought" within both Sunni and Shia Islam. To date, roughly 150 have agreed to attend, including prominent individuals such as the Secretary General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference and the grand mufti of Egypt. While invitations were sent to a few Muslim scholars from the United States (two, to be specific), Russia and European countries, Shaboukh said conference participants are being drawn primarily from Arab and Islamic-majority states.

3. (C) Both Jarrah and Shaboukh said they were encouraged by the positive response to the conference, particularly given "sensitivities" by some Egyptians and Saudis about a Jordanian foundation hosting the event. They noted that religious figures from Iraq's Sunni community (including those resident in Jordan and the UAE) had accepted the invitations, and were hopeful that Ayatollah Sistani and/or other invited Iraqi Shia clerics would also attend, though they had yet to respond. (NOTE: Jordanian National Security Adviser Saad Kheir is in touch with Sistani's advisers. He and the King believe Sistani will endorse this effort, which could then become an important tool in defeating sectarian violence in Iraq. END NOTE.)

MORE TOLERANCE AND LESS FATWAS

4. (C) Turning to the conference agenda, Shaboukh stated that the gathering was entitled "True Islam and its Role in Contemporary Society." King Abdullah (patron of Al Al Bayt) is scheduled to open the conference with a formal address on July 4. Shaboukh said he hoped the event would achieve two major goals: demonstrate Islamic solidarity against violence and terrorism, and emphasize principles designed to curb the proliferation of fatwas by extremists. With regard to the former, Shaboukh bemoaned the negative perception of Islam in the West and asserted that "real Muslims" would never condone acts of terrorism. Presentations and sessions at the conference would accordingly emphasize that Islam is a faith

of tolerance, moderation and dialogue, not violence. Muslims worldwide are called to respect and obey the laws of the countries in which they live, he added, unless these laws are clearly contrary to established Islamic teaching. Regarding fatwas, Shaboukh criticized the issuance of fatwas, particularly those that encourage violence, by "persons who have no basis in Islam for doing so." He said that there are established Islamic principles about who may issue fatwas and under what circumstances, and that conference participants would highlight and endorse these principles to make clear the illegitimacy of fatwas issued by Muslim extremists.

15. (C) Jarrah said that the conference would conclude with the release of a formal communique, but that conference participants would have to hammer out the text after they gathered in Amman. When asked if the communique's denouncement of terrorism might exclude "national liberation movements" or "resistance to foreign occupation," Jarrah was adamant that the conference "will not become politicized." He stressed that organizers would reject attempts by participants to use the conference to condemn U.S. foreign policy in the region.

COMMENT

16. (C) The Amman Message and the upcoming international conference are at the center of King Abdullah's determined effort to promote moderate Islam and to isolate Muslim extremists who try to justify their violent acts under the guise of religion. Even if the conference does not achieve all of its organizers' aspirations, it is nevertheless a welcome development.

HALE